

The
LAST BOOKSHOP

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LAST BOOKSHOP

EMMA YOUNG



FREMANTLE PRESS

Emma Young has always traded in words. Armed with a BA in English Literature, she became a bookseller. When the customers finally wore her out, she retrained as a journalist. She is now a digital reporter for *WAtoday*, with work regularly appearing in sister publications *The Age* and *The Sydney Morning Herald*. Her eight wins at the WA Media Awards include the 2018 Matt Price Award for Best Columnist. After turning thirty, she burst with belated urgency into novel-writing and has since been selected for the Katharine Susannah Prichard Writers' Centre First Edition Retreat and the Four Centres Emerging Writers' Program. In 2019, *The Last Bookshop* was shortlisted for the inaugural Fogarty Literary Award.

For Mum and Dad, who encouraged a bookworm

One

It was already five past nine, but the shop was dark. Sebastian was late.

‘Damn you, Seb,’ Cait said aloud, unlocking the doors and propping them open with the stone Snugglepot and Cuddlepie statues she’d bought from a Gumtree seller some years back. They were stupidly heavy and sadly battered – Cuddlepie’s nose had been bashed off somewhere along the line – but Cait was still delighted with the purchase. ‘I know they’re not exactly beating the doors down on a Saturday, but I can’t afford to be missing out on passing trade while he’s getting his act together,’ she told Snugglepot.

She flicked on the lights and started hauling out the first of the two front trolleys. Made by the same carpenter who had made the rest of the shop’s fittings, each had four wheeled legs supporting a large, shallow wooden tray at waist height. Cait had filled them with rows of books standing face-forward, leaning back like slanted dominoes, for display outside. She had hand-picked every title. Impulse buys, little joke and gift books: 1001 songs to listen to in love, another 1001 for breakups, 101 countries to visit when you finally manage to get off your arse and stop wasting money on impulse buys. Et cetera. But also novels and nonfiction, teasers to hint at the vast range of stock inside.

The trolley’s weight pulled it swiftly down the ramp, Cait struggling to hang on to it and not let it career across the road to the cafe opposite. The street looked sad and stained in the morning light, stripped of both its night wildlife and weekday rat-race. It was too early for most of Perth’s sleepy centre to be open on a Saturday. The cafe was pretty much it. But it was doing a roaring trade, thanks to

the brightly coloured cyclists who packed it like exotic birds, their bikes parked in a big drift on the footpath. They yelled genially at each other, holding conversations over the crash of plates and the screaming coffee grinder. Cait went in for the second trolley. Now she'd been hauling them in and out for years, they were rickety and their wheels were stiff. They were the only fitting that hadn't really worked for her. She thought about getting rid of them every morning when she put them out, and every night when she brought them in.

'Pain in the arse,' she told Cuddlepier now, as she butted the second into place beside the first. But just because she was grumbling about them didn't mean she would actually ditch them. Cait disliked change, especially in her shop. Her daily fantasy about setting the trolleys on fire and sending them flaming down the street was just another part of a gloriously reliable routine.

She went back in, pushed the big casement windows facing the street wide open and hefted the *Open* sign out onto the pavement. The steel A-frame was as heavy as the trolleys but she'd picked it on the advice of Phil Crabbe, the chemist who'd been her next-door neighbour before Gucci shouldered him out. 'This street is almost as windy as the Terrace,' Phil had told her. 'It's because of all the tall buildings. And not enough trees to slow the wind down. You need a good heavy sign like mine.' And he'd written down the name of his signmaker for her. The sign bore the shop's name, Book Fiend, at the top in the same angular Gothic script that was painted on the facade above the doors. Below it was chalkboard. She had no time today to find a new quote, so she left yesterday's chalked on it: *A book must be the axe for the frozen sea within us – Kafka*. Bit esoteric, maybe, but what the hell; there were plenty of pretentious gits up this end of town to appreciate it. And it was her shop, after all. She looked fondly back at it, its windows flung outward like beckoning arms.

Her first order of business when she'd opened had been to make the shop welcoming, and she figured she'd nailed it. Behind the front windows, the first third of floor space was open plan, full of display islands radiating outwards from the central front table: her pride and joy. The back two-thirds contained library-style stacks for the second-hand stuff. That had been another must, selling second-hand alongside new. It allowed for the kind of serendipity she just couldn't get in choosing stock from catalogues alone. And it gave her customers that sense of infinite possibility, that thrill of treasures lying maybe just

around the next dusty corner, or perhaps the one after that. You only ever got that in a second-hand bookstore.

Among the stacks were scattered armchairs: mismatched, squashy things with lamps hanging obligingly over them and tiny wooden coffee tables beside them, functioning as rest stops for browsers and also for Cait to put things on while she was stocking shelves. She never had enough hands. Though by now she did have a ninja-like ability to sense when a book was about to fall off a shelf, and to catch it on its way down. Annoyingly, this skill did not carry over into any other environment. She'd need to think of another party trick, should she ever again have the misfortune to find herself at a party.

Surrounding it all, lining the walls, were floor-to-ceiling shelves, whitewashed and crammed with the new stock, all crisp and shiny and sweet-smelling. They might not have the chancy mystery of the preloved, but then, the old ones could never bring this sense of pure, white-paged, black-inked newness, the latest releases stacked ten deep, their very abundance suggesting they must be the next big thing. The upper levels around the walls were reached with rolling ladders mounted on tracks so Cait and her customers could push them wherever necessary. It was essentially the dream library Cait would never be able to afford at home, made flesh in a Hay Street shopfront.

Today, Cait's own flesh was hot. Already. The air-con had been struggling lately, not helped by Cait insisting on leaving the windows open. She should ask Seb to climb up and have a look at the filters. Where the hell was he, anyway? She went to sort out the till, wiping the trolley dust from her hands onto her jeans. She'd jettisoned her usual top-to-toe blacks in honour of the weekend. Today it was blue jeans, once-white tennis shoes and a loud red singlet that clashed violently with her hair, a mane of wiry copper usually twisted into a knot for practical purposes, but today let run riot in a what-the-hell mess. That was the nice thing about the mobile clients. Old people tended to think you beautiful just because you were young and able-bodied. And around them, it was easier to appreciate that yourself. There was plenty Cait loved about Book Fiend's location, but the place did little for the self-esteem, being awash each day with coiffed young office ladies whose YouTube-enabled hairdos, held in place by invisible means, were as finely crafted as the tall takeaway lattes they clutched as they stalked about the shop on their lunchbreaks. The daily parade

of the well-dressed never failed to make her feel as though she should make more of an effort, but thankfully the feeling was usually fleeting and today, entirely absent.

Cait was about to focus on the till when finally Seb galloped up, trailing satchel, earphones and ropy dreadlocks. Seb's stovepipe body in black skinny jeans, topped by its shock of long dreads, always put Cait in mind of a young and vigorously growing palm tree. She put on her sternest face.

'Sorry! Sorry-sorry-sorry, Cait,' he said, leaping behind the counter and stowing his tangle of stuff with one hearty shove. 'Slept in.'

'Must've been nice,' Cait said. 'I, on the other hand, got up early to make sure I had plenty of time to come in here and pick out the books for the mobile clients while you opened. Which I didn't have time for last night, because after a dead-quiet day, the Friday night crowd decided to come in and trash the place, and I was too busy keeping it tidy for you so you didn't come in to a disaster zone.' She felt it appropriate, as owner and boss, to be a bit strict with Seb sometimes. But, God, he had that puppy dog routine down pat.

'Give me your most horrible jobs as punishment,' Seb said, lifting his chin as though prepared to accept justice nobly. 'Go on. Name it. Thy will be done.'

'Well, get on with counting that, and I'll go pick the books, and then we'll talk.' She left him counting coins and went into the stacks. She was now a bit pushed for time, but at least she already had some ideas. A day of mobile clients could sometimes be worth as much or more than a day's takings in the shop, and the shop was not doing so well right now that she could afford to let the quality of her selections slip. And, while she needed to keep the mobile clients happy for financial reasons, it was about more than money; it was a matter of pride to her to get it right, and not come back with a reject pile.

First, June, who had been laid up with the flu. She had downplayed it on the phone, but she must have been quite ill because it took nothing short of an earthquake to keep June off her feet. She had probably long since run out of books to read – June was completely incapable of lying down and doing nothing – so she would need a big haul. Cait could head straight towards her first choice.

Last time, she'd brought June the entire Chronicles of Narnia series. It had come out in an irresistible new special edition, all seven books in one volume, and the sheer beauty of the fat, gold-stamped

hardcover had lured Cait not just to give it to June but to re-read the series herself. She hadn't read it since she was a kid, when she'd fallen headlong into that warm, lively evocation of English childhood – the truest escapism an Australian child could get – combined with the fantastic realism of the world C.S. Lewis created, in which unforgettable good guys and bad guys had spellbinding adventures in the land beyond the wardrobe. The wintry evil of the White Witch, the mighty reassurance of Aslan, the sweetness of the incorruptible Lucy: these were some of the most alluring and enduring characters Cait had ever encountered.

Revisiting Narnia as an adult, she'd realised it wasn't just the adventures and the characters that had captured her. There were darker themes here, and they'd completely passed her childhood self by, on a conscious level at least, but now she saw the reach for greater truths that had resonated so deeply.

This new appreciation had sparked a curiosity that prompted Cait to next read a biography of Lewis, whose body of writing had gone way beyond his children's works, covering theology and criticism and academia, and had immense influence on the world. She'd loved the biography nearly as much as the Narnia books, and would lay money on it that June would feel the same way, so she was bringing a copy today. And, in a beautiful example of the synchronicity that was one of the best parts of her job, only yesterday had come in three colourful little matching paperbacks, with vintage covers and brittle spines: Lewis's first three novels, all sci-fi, possibly even out of print. She hadn't had time to google it, but she'd never come across them before. It gave her a little pang not to put them straight on the front table, but she had to at least offer them to June first.

She grabbed them from where she'd secreted them out the back. Right, that did it for old stuff. She needed something a bit shinier to balance it out. She skirted round to the walls, the floorboards under the threadbare carpet creaking beneath her feet, and scanned the literary fiction. The opening notes of Led Zeppelin started coming through the speakers, at an appropriately subdued volume. The first album – one of Seb's shop go-tos. She pulled out Yann Martel's *The High Mountains of Portugal* from the new releases and added *Amnesia* by Peter Carey. June was behind in her Careys. She paused at the Ds. More Don DeLillo? It would be a risk. The man was widely accepted as a genius, but his books often lay somewhere between postmodern

and downright surreal. June had liked *White Noise*, and so last time Cait had brought her *Underworld*, an absolute doorstopper. Maybe she'd wait and see how June went with that before bringing his new one. Following the wall back, she picked up something on a whim. Umberto Eco's *On Literature*. A mix of philosophy and literary criticism. Dense, no doubt, but a beautiful hardcover, and maybe June would like a stab at it, given Eco's death had been in the news. She checked the time on her phone and saw she'd have to be quick about getting Max and Dorothy's stuff. She put down June's pile, which was getting heavy, and went over to the general and crime fiction. Max had recently worked his way through the Dark Tower series as well as *Mr Mercedes*, so more Stephen King probably wouldn't go astray. She pulled out *Finders Keepers*, the sequel to *Mr Mercedes*, and *Doctor Sleep*, the follow-up to *The Shining*. Wait, had Max read *The Shining*? She grabbed that too, just in case, and some Joe Hill for good measure. Now, she needed straight crime. She picked up the new Poirot mystery by Sophie Hannah. That should rattle him. She grinned to herself. Then she did a quick lap of the second-hand stacks and saw a well-worn *LA Confidential*. Well, if he hadn't read that already, he certainly should. OK, Max done. Thankfully, she had already had an idea for Dorothy, and it only took a minute to gather the final pile. She dumped it all into a box Seb had waiting for her at the till.

'Reporting for duty, ma'am. Don't hold back.'

'Well, since you're asking for punishment, I think the air-con filters need clearing. And there are six boxes of comics out the back that came in yesterday. You could sort those and ring the guy and let him know how much credit we'll give. If he's cool with it, process them and put them out. Mmm, what else?' She cast her gaze around. 'Just cleaning, I guess. The dust is back up to eyeball level.'

'Can't let the bunnies breed,' he said. 'Want a hand out to the car with that?'

'Nah. It's not that much. No nursing home today, just June and Max and Dotty Dorothy.' It was impossible to keep up the stern tone. She couldn't stay mad at Seb, despite his elevation of tardiness into something approaching an art form. 'Make me some money today, all right? It's been quiet all week.'

Seb saluted. 'Charm officially turned on. Say hi to June for me. Oh! That reminds me.' He dashed off into the stacks towards the sci-fi. Seb was nuts about sci-fi. Early in his employment he had amused

himself on a quiet day by micro-classifying the large and chaotic section into sub-genres: dystopian, climate change, space opera and cyberpunk. He had earnestly explained to Cait that cyberpunk had itself spawned numerous sub-genres: steampunk, biopunk, nanopunk, postcyberpunk, atompunk, clockpunk, dieselpunk ... even splatterpunk, a gory, horror-like sci-fi.

‘Like Clive Barker?’ Cait had asked. ‘I’ve got him in Horror.’

‘Well, you could do that, too,’ Seb had replied, with an air of humouring her. She hadn’t had the heart to tell him there was no way those shelf divisions were staying, resolving to let them dissolve back into chaos on their own. But Cait couldn’t deny he’d proved there was a strong market for well-chosen sci-fi and fantasy. She now let him do the stock orders for those himself.

He re-emerged from his domain now with a book in hand. ‘Tell her she should try this.’ Cait looked at it doubtfully. *Ender’s Game*. A classic by a master of the genre, but it was still genre, and technically a kids’ book at that. June was less gentle with Seb than Cait was. Her refusals of all the titles he tried to recommend were decidedly unvarnished. But the perennially good-natured Seb saw this as a challenge, and from the messages the pair now passed back and forth through Cait, Seb’s persistence and June’s rejection were only endearing them to each other.

‘You’ve got no chance,’ she said. Seb put it in the box as if he hadn’t heard her. ‘All right, I’ll suggest it, but you’re a glutton for punishment.’

‘Have a good day,’ he replied, with a sunny smile.

It was early enough that she’d been able to park right outside at the kerb without paying or fighting for a space. Sluggish takings aside, there were definitely positives to living in a city still fifteen years off reaching the size of Melbourne, or so they said.

The sun, already hostile, lit up the dings and scrapes on her car. These scars, and that other embattled traveller, Arthur Dent from *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*, had inspired its nickname: Dent. She dumped her box on the passenger seat and started the engine. The cracked old vinyl on the steering wheel was hot to the touch. Damn it: almost nine-thirty already.